The Creativity Hoax: Precarious Work and the Gig Economy. Morgan, George and Nelligan, Pariece. New York, NY: Anthem Press, 2018.

Book Review: *The Creativity Hoax: Precarious Work and the Gig Economy*, by George Morgan and Pariece Nelligan (Anthem Press, 2018).

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George Morgan and Pariece Nelligan's *The Creativity Hoax* offers a bold critique to the current and widespread reflex to celebrate human creativity, at a moment when "creative workforces" are celebrated as a panacea for economic regenerations in the wake of the 2008-09 global financial crisis. As captured by the book title, Morgan and Nelligan expose "creativity" as a delusional discourse – a product of, rather than a remedy to, the ills of neoliberal capitalism. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, as scholars and activists call for alternatives to neoliberalism based on social solidarity, Morgan and Nelligan's rich analysis and engaged advocacy is a timely and invaluable addition to this pressing debate.

The authors set their analysis in Western contexts that have undergone a shift from the era of the Fordist employment contract to the current flexibilization and informalization of work. As a starting point, they draw heavily upon Boltanski and Chiapello's (2006) analysis of contemporary capitalism's ability to absorb artistic and social critique and make its processes of exploitation ever more deceptive. Nonetheless, Morgan and Nelligan depart from this more politico-economic understanding of the so-called "creative industries" and instead take a deeply empathetic approach that delves into experiences of creative young aspirants. Based on 100 life-history interviews and participant-observation of networking activities in Sydney, *The Creativity Hoax* features biographic narratives of young people aspiring for creative careers. Particularly revealing about Morgan and Nelligan's person-

centered methodology is the insight into how creative aspirants are being shaped, and are struggling, as a peculiar type of worker pursuing a precarious vocational path.

In Sydney, as in many Global Cities, the oversupply of creative labor has meant that creative aspirants need to embrace flexibility and mobility as moral imperatives, as they perform a range of creative and non-creative work to sustain their momentum toward a "creative" career. In their pursuits, these young people see themselves as defined by their future potential rather than the work they currently do, as captured in the saying "you *are* what you *aim to become*" (5). This tendency generates a continuous state of "waithood," as proponents perpetually transition into creative careers that often fail to take off. At the same time, the discourse of creative economic regeneration in Australia increasingly promotes a creative workforce that sees its skills as "transferable and abstract" (6), ready to be extracted by the new economy. Accordingly, *The Creativity Hoax* makes an important contribution to anthropology of work in demonstrating that it is precisely this promotion of flexibility and mobility that renders creative labor precarious and vulnerable to hyper-exploitation.

As regards creative workforces, Morgan and Nelligan are primarily concerned about the predicaments of creative aspirants from disadvantaged backgrounds, including those from the working class and/or ethnic minorities, who make up about 80 percent of the authors' interviewees. The remainder of their research participants come from middle-class backgrounds who form a contrast group, enabling the authors to argue that working-class and/or minority backgrounds become a major disadvantage for many gifted aspirants pursuing creative careers.

The Creativity Hoax follows the journeys of young "creatives" from their youthful subcultural play to institutional training and struggles to commercialize their creativity. Chapter 1 explores how the idea of creativity has been co-opted by capitalism as a supposedly emancipatory form of labor and yet fails to deliver the jobs that match its

aspirants' skills and aspirations. Chapter 2 traces the formation of young people's creative hopes to pedagogical practice in post-industrial societies. In order to retain learners' interest in education, educators have shifted from more formal methods to creative pedagogies that encourage students to "go for their dream" (40). Such pedagogical practice is found to be pivotal for young people's aspirations for creative careers. Yet they are confronted with a sense of betrayal and frustration once they discover the oversubscribed job market after graduation. The resentment is especially strong for those from working-class backgrounds.

Chapters 3 to 5 examine how the geography of creative industries and the idea of a "day job" play roles in working-class and minority aspirants' struggles to attain creative careers. As Sydney becomes increasingly gentrified, the high rents in the cultural and sub-cultural hubs of the city make it particularly challenging for these mostly suburban youth, as they attempt to break into powerful and informal networks in the city center that are essential bridges into the creative industries. A revealing insight from the text is that the two authors are often approached by their interviewees as potential contacts into these very industries. Regardless, the sectors' oversubscribed nature means that aspirants need to remake themselves into "just-in-time workers" who are "in a state of perpetual readiness, convinced that the big break is just over the horizon" (67). They are propelled to work a range of "day jobs" that are flexible enough for them to drop at any time for a creative project. In this process, these youth become a reserve army of creative labor, a "creative underclass" that is dispersed and often hidden from public purview.

Central to most aspirants' narratives is the striking dichotomy they make between a day job and a creative career. For instance, Roger, an interviewee who works in a hardware store, deliberately distances himself from his day job and refuses to be promoted to managerial positions in the company, as he distains white-collar jobs as "lacking value." Showing minimal emotional commitment to day jobs enables Roger and other young

aspirants to construct engaging narratives about their working life as one of "waiting for" their creative career to commence (80) – which, in Roger's case, would mean a career in music.

Nevertheless, as Chapter 5 continues to expose, it is particularly difficult for men from working-class backgrounds to remake themselves into what Morgan and Nelligan termed "labile labor" – that is, workers who are "mobile, spontaneous, malleable and capable of being aroused by new vocational possibilities" (85). This is because most of these men embody a "no-nonsense" working-class masculinity that is at odds with the codes of self-promotion and individualism central to creative labor (88). Another insightful observation the authors make is that women tend to respond to these "cultural codes" better than men do. However, this point needs to be buttressed via data from a larger sample than the cases presented in this chapter.

As creative aspirants from disadvantaged backgrounds continue to face adversity, Chapter 6 explores how they make compromises and seek alternative opportunities to secure their livelihoods. In light of these often-herculean efforts, Morgan and Nelligan's concluding chapter explores how young creatives can pursue their craft in ways that are less exploitative from standard forms of commercialization, entrepreneurial projects that the authors call "feral enterprises." However, these independent endeavors are also often exclusionary, and most members of the creative underclass have little start-up capital and, as a result, are forced to resort to the sporadic work to be found in the gig economy.

This discussion leads to the final and perhaps the most optimistic part of the book. Morgan and Nelligan have long advocated for more governmental funding, private loans, venture capital, philanthropy, as well as special social-security schemes such as Universal Basic Income to support the projects of creative aspirants. At the same time, the pair pleads for an extension of schools' and universities' responsibility to support their alumni as

"creative adjuncts" in granting them access to equipment and space, further training, as well as networks into a creative career.

Overall, this book not only furthers an understanding of creative labor under the conditions of neoliberal capitalism, but is also a brilliant example of engaged advocacy that reaches beyond the comfort zone of most academics. Although Morgan and Nelligan's critique is forged against creative industries in contemporary Western societies, curious readers may draw lessons and insights to rethink other post-industrial sectors, such as academia. Moreover, the book's overall impact could be strengthened if the authors provided additional insight into the roles that institutions and capital play in the exploitation and exclusion that their working-class interlocutors must confront. This additional layer of analysis could enable readers to initiate further dialogue on creative industries beyond those of Western societies and forge an alternative politics to confront the crisis of work in the globalized post-industrial economies of today.

References:

Boltanski, Luc and Eve Chiapello. 2006. *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. Translated by Gregory Elliott. London: Verso.